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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

THIRD ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

# Shakespeare and Germany

By

Professor Alois Brandl

Of Berlin University

President of the German Shakespeare Society

On July 1, 1913



New York

Oxford University Press American Branch

35 West 32nd Street

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Monograph



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# THIRD ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

## SHAKESPEARE AND GERMANY

BY PROFESSOR ALOIS BRANDL

OF BERLIN UNIVERSITY

PRESIDENT OF THE GERMAN SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY

July 1, 1913.

WITH sentiments of profound reverence and gratitude I would say as the prologue to my discourse, and I feel sure that millions of my countrymen would say it with me, that the greatest boon which has ever come from England to Germany is the supreme and permeating influence of William Shakespeare.

Several English writers have benefited our folk. Dickens gave us the novel of charity, Walter Scott the novel of history, Thackeray the novel of reality; Byron became an inspiration to Goethe and Heine; Carlyle still proves a valuable educator of our nation: but Shakespeare has swayed and turned the whole current of our literature.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the old imperial race of Middle Europe knew only two sources of poetical art from abroad: the ancients, and France. Latin and Greek authors were introduced by our clergy and our schools, French authors by our nobility and better-class citizens. There were wars between French and German rulers on the right and on the left banks of the Rhine, but they could not prevent, could not even interrupt, this fraternity of minds; the culture of Germany had for centuries developed principally through intercourse and through rivalry with her western neighbour. England for many centuries had nothing to say. Neither Chaucer nor Spenser had attracted the attention of German writers. Elizabethan plays, no doubt, were acted in German towns and courts by English comedians; but only their subjects made an impression, their acting and staging were admired; the word of Shakespeare was not heard, nor was his personality felt. Milton, the strongest man among English poets, stirred the German republicans of the North and the South, the Hamburgers and the Swiss; he was the first English writer who touched the German soul; but he could never become popular; he

soared too high in the sphere of abstraction; he was only a prophet, a forerunner of the master. The *Spectator* did become popular, *Robinson* and *Gulliver* were read even in our villages; but what they had to offer was only poetry of the foot—to use a happy expression of Professor Herford—not poetry of the wing; they proved suggestive and amusing, but did not contain any revelations. The tide did not turn until, a short time before the French Revolution, Shakespeare conquered Germany with his word and his thought: then England, for the first time, had a voice on the Rhine and by the Danube, and became a force in the growth of German culture.

The man who was chiefly instrumental in bringing about this change was Lessing. Many educated Germans felt about Shakespeare as he felt, and some of our literary men were working in the same direction in which he worked; but Lessing produced the strongest argument. He started from the opinion of Voltaire, whose critique and imitations of Shakespeare had done most towards calling the attention of German readers to the English dramatist. The great Voltaire had learned in England that Shakespeare had a large soul, and was a genius by nature; but he found him a sinner against the rules of Aristotle as deduced by the classicists. No, said Lessing; Shakespeare does not sin against the rules of Aristotle, if you but understand them properly; Shakespeare agrees with him in all essential things much better than Voltaire himself. As an example, Lessing compared the appearance of the ghost in Voltaire's *Sémiramis*, in broad daylight, at the council-assembly, announced only by a clap of thunder, with the ghost in *Hamlet*, which appears at midnight, on the ramparts of Elsinore, seen first by the lonely sentries, through whose observations we are well prepared for what it has to tell Hamlet. A clearer and more convincing comparison could not be given, and Shakespeare at once took his place on the throne vacated by Voltaire. Evidently, Lessing pitted one of the two literary authorities recognized in his country at the time against the other, the ancients against the French—more perhaps than was strictly legitimate. He thus succeeded in calling in a third authority, the English; and by multiplying our authorities he gave us greater confidence to think independently.

This discussion might have remained a transitory literary controversy: but circumstances raised it to the position of a starting-point for great deeds.

Germany wanted dramas. Many of the princes and princelings



who ruled it maintained theatres in their residences: this was perhaps the only noteworthy service done to old Germany by the 'Kleinstaaterei'. The wealthier towns followed suit, and built theatres of their own. The people, tired of sermons, and unable to take an interest in politics or sports, sometimes even forbidden to travel, flocked to the performances. A successful play could make its author famous, and his work influential in the highest degree. But in order to be successful a play had to be poetical, had to contain a body of thought, and had to be clothed in fine rhetoric; for the average German, though a poor politician, had by his good schools become an intelligent person, had a satchelful of solid knowledge on his back, and would not be satisfied with superficial farces and operettas; he wanted to be amused intelligently, and this demand for a literary drama at the time of Lessing was exactly met by Shakespeare.

A negative circumstance must not be forgotten: in Germany no strong tradition of home-made dramas stood in the way of Shakespeare, as was the case in France, where the respect for Corneille, Racine, Molière, and their schools was a bar against the Elizabethan. The very poverty of the German native drama before Goethe and Schiller was Shakespeare's ally. 'So our virtues lie in the interpretation of the time.'

Translators assisted Lessing in making Shakespeare known and understood, but imitators planted him in German soil. It was his good luck again that his first imitators were our classics, who moulded the entire taste of the following generations. Lessing himself led the way, and borrowed his blank verse. Young Goethe took over the free and almost lawless structure of the Histories, and, in addition, he borrowed a number of details which we find scattered throughout his works.

In the first part of his *Faust*, for example, the appearance of the 'Erdegeist' was suggested by that of the spirit of Julius Caesar in Brutus's tent; the meeting of Faust with the brawling students by the scene where Prince Hal turns up in the midst of the Falstaff company; Margaret's low-minded widow-companion, Frau Schwertlein, by the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*; the fatal duel of Valentine by that of Tybalt; the insanity of Margaret by that of Ophelia. Nor was Schiller less indebted to Shakespeare than Goethe. How much he learned from Shakespeare is best seen by comparing the two brothers in his *Robbers* with the sons of Gloucester in *King Lear*, or the conspiracy of Tell with that in *Julius Caesar*. Goethe and Schiller were never slavish imitators,

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but their drama is, in essence, a plant from the seed of Shakespeare. There is also an original drama of Germany, of an absolutely different type: it is the musical *Bühnenfestspiel* of Richard Wagner.

From the time that Shakespeare was thus naturalized in Germany, the literary drama has become a most important factor in German life. It has attracted our best poets, so much so that the most characteristic portion of our literature must not merely be read, like modern English literature, which can be enjoyed on the banks of the Nile or on an ostrich farm in South Africa almost as well as in London; but if you mean to do justice to the best modern German literature, you must go to the theatre and hear it. Consequently, a good theatre is a necessary part of the equipment of every German town of any dimensions; any place without it is looked down upon as philistine, is avoided by well-to-do people, and is considered a mere *Nest*, because it does not enable its inhabitants to enjoy the most interesting part of national literature. It is astonishing to remark what sacrifices a middle-sized German town of, say, 20,000 people will make to procure a theatre. Societies and individuals will make contributions for years together till they have collected enough to begin building. On a fair site the fair building rears its head; flower-beds are laid out in front of it; the most modern appliances are sought out for the stage; there is a foyer provided where the audience may saunter in the intervals, to wish each other good evening and doubtless to exchange brief comments on the play: a feeling of festivity, 'Festlichkeit', reigns everywhere. Instead of demanding rent, the municipality often makes a special allowance to enable the manager to engage a good cast. Above all, the people themselves go to the theatre regularly; they often subscribe for a certain number of seats a week, and thus compel the manager to keep a variety of plays in stock, a repertory. They take good and indifferent plays as they come, and are enabled in this way to compare, to comprehend, to relish poetical life and beauty, and to despise mere sensation. A literary atmosphere pervades the society of such a town, animates its meetings, and brightens the hearts. The blessings of this repertory theatre, which is an essential feature of the modern German 'Gartenstadt', we owe principally to Shakespeare. He has given us the plays which at the outset drew the largest audiences, which trained the best actors and critics, and which were taken as models by the more gifted play-writers. No doubt his name would be the best with which to inaugurate also an English repertory theatre, and

to induce English people to return to their pre-Cromwellian habits of going to the theatre regularly.

Even nowadays the theatre is the stronghold of the Shakespeare cult in Germany. There are some 180 German companies, and they maintain in their repertory about twenty-five plays of Shakespeare. On looking up the statistics published every year in the *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* with regard to the frequency of performances, one finds at the head of the list such serious plays as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. On an average, throughout the Fatherland, three or four plays of Shakespeare are performed every evening. In Berlin, the theatrical capital, it sometimes happens that on five or six successive evenings as many different plays of his are to be seen. Whenever the supply of modern plays fails for a time, Shakespeare is called in, and is sure to save the financial situation.

A poet who is so frequently heard in the theatre is much stronger than a poet who is merely read in books: this explains the miraculous popularity which Shakespeare enjoys in Germany. If one wishes to gauge the significance of Shakespeare for the mass of German people, one need only open Büchmann's Collection of 'Winged Words'; there one sees with astonishment how intensely the German lives in Shakespeare and speaks his words. The expressions 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark', or 'caviare to the general' come as readily to the lips of the German as of the Englishman. Thousands speak with Hamlet of 'To be or not to be', and with Prince Henry of 'a world in arms'. From *Midsummer Night's Dream* was borrowed the burlesque phrase 'Well roared, lion', from *Measure for Measure* the 'tooth of time', from *Lear* 'the learned Thebans', and 'every inch a king', as well as the inevitable 'last not least', which is even more often employed by Germans than by the English themselves. All the other British authors together have not yielded as many winged words as Shakespeare alone; no other foreign author, not even Homer, approaches him in such a degree of popularity; and one has to turn to the Bible to find a more influential work of foreign origin: only this book of books soars even above Shakespeare.

Remarkable as such adoption of metaphorical or witty phrases may be, still more significant is the fact that a series of common words have through him become part and parcel of daily usage. Professor Kluge, in a paper read to the German Shakespeare Society in 1893, had some remarkable communications to make with regard to the augmentation of the German dictionary by Shake-

speare. If Germans mean to greet each other with a typically German expression, *urdeutsch*, they say *Heil*—without dreaming that it is borrowed from the cry of the witches in *Macbeth*, ‘Hail to thee’. The substantive *Heim*, equivalent to the ‘home’ of the English language, is due to the translators of Shakespeare; formerly it was used in German only adverbially, in words like *heimkehren*, ‘return home’. *Halle*, as corresponding to English ‘hall’, had died out in Germany shortly after Luther, it is not found in literary use for centuries; but in Klopstock, a notable admirer of Shakespeare, the word reappears, and bears the same exalted signification, ‘hall of a castle’, as it does in Shakespeare, and not that of ‘entrance hall’, as in everyday English. Even the use of the word *Sect* for champagne arose in connexion with Shakespeare. In the eighteenth century *Sect* was employed by the German only for heavy wines such as were made from dried berries in Spain and in the Canary Islands; in this sense the word is employed by Shakespeare too, when he makes Falstaff such a lover of ‘sack’. But when the Falstaff actor Ludwig Devrient in Berlin came weary and thirsty from the theatre to the tavern of Luther and Wegener in the Charlottenstrasse, and wanted champagne, he continued in the tenor of his Falstaff-part to call for ‘Sect’—an expression that landlord, guests, and waiters quickly adopted and successfully transmitted to the world of Shakespeareans outside. This is real popularity. In short, when the German laughs or drinks or philosophizes, when he enters a castle or returns to his home, the spirit of Shakespeare is ever at his side, thinks for him and jokes with him, like a right good friend.

Politicians and statesmen have not failed to make use of this power of Shakespeare over the German people. ‘Hamlet is Germany’ impatiently exclaimed Freiligrath, the friend of liberty, to his hesitating countrymen a short time before 1848. In opposition to him, Bismarck compared Hamlet to Napoleon III. Altogether Bismarck, in his student days in Göttingen and associating freely with Englishmen and Americans, had not only acquired a deep reading knowledge of Shakespeare, but had also to some extent lived many a Falstaff scene on his own account. Prince Harry, who to all appearance had wasted his youth with tippling beer-swillers, but who, by this means, obtained a deep knowledge of men and things, and later, becoming serious, surprises every one by the sudden ripeness he shows, was one of Bismarck’s favourite characters all his life long. He also knew how to find support in Shakespeare when he enthusiastically called out the masses against

the parties. He was sure that if he clothed his thoughts in Shakespeare's words they would best appeal to the hearts of his countrymen.

In the world of art and science, too, many a scholar, as is but natural, has taken a deep interest in Shakespeare. In philosophy, Schopenhauer, the famous pessimist, may be mentioned; few objects escaped his iconoclasm; one of these few was Shakespeare. Recently the psychologist Dilthey, in his well-known book on *Inward Experience and the Poet*, chooses some of his best illustrations from the great English dramatist. He compares Shakespeare, the 'biographer of a thousand souls', with Goethe, who is constantly autobiographical. He ascribes Shakespeare's wonderful gift of incarnating characters to his power of observation, to his piercing eye ever directed on the world outside, to his true English empiricism, and to the influence of an age the environment of which was extremely favourable to his genius. In jurisprudence Shakespeare has been cited before the court. Jhering, the author of *Kampfs Recht*, has discussed Shylock's bond from the standpoint of Roman law. Kohler has scrutinized his tragic heroes as closely as if they were criminals. The question whether his knowledge of law gives ground for believing that he himself in his youth was employed in a court of justice has had no less interest for the German than for the English jurist. Medical men have examined his poisons, and such of his characters as are tainted by insanity. Astronomers have proved his allegiance to the Ptolemaic system. Everywhere he attracts the far-seeing minds among the learned, and sets them riddles to solve, though he himself was but a dealer in the things of imagination, and, as far as we can see, not superior in knowledge to the average well-bred Londoner of his time.

If we turn to philology we find that the study of English in German universities has to a great extent simply grown out of the endeavour to increase by courses of lectures the pleasure which professor and student alike were taking in Shakespeare. In Bonn, in Tübingen, in Marburg, peaceful little university towns, where poetry-loving souls were wont to foregather, were heard the first scholarly lectures on English literature, and for the most part they centred round Shakespeare. The love for him has helped to promote also those Early English studies which, like nothing else, impress the student with the original identity of English and German language, poetry, folklore, custom, and law. In order to fathom the depths of Shakespeare the first German society for



literary research was founded, the *Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft*, forty-nine years ago, long before a *Goethe-Gesellschaft* was thought of. The list of its members is headed by His Majesty the German Emperor, who is well known as a warm admirer especially of Shakespeare's *Histories*.

Again, our secondary schools have made the great Elizabethan the centre of English studies. German lads in the higher classes of the *Gymnasium*, especially in the North where the dialects bear a closer resemblance to English, find it easy, with the help of the improved modern language teaching which has of late been developed, to acquire his language sufficiently within a year, so that in the second year they can read with their teachers one or two of his plays, and enjoy them. He is always the favourite author, he brings out the best qualities of the professor, conveys to the students a keen interest in English institutions and history, and provides both with sound moral and political lessons.

For the future, the well-wisher of the German people can but wish and hope that this love for Shakespeare will last and ever increase. We all feel that no one can enter into the enjoyment of his characters without becoming himself freer and greater; a nation that takes him for its leader cannot be other than a manly nation. And it is not the least of his merits that he is a friendly exponent of England in Germany. He has surrounded Westminster and Windsor, London Bridge and the Mermaid Tavern with a bright halo, and many a king of Old England, about whom no one on the Continent would have cared, has won through Shakespeare respect and fame. It makes a very considerable difference whether we come to know a nation only through the newspapers, or through poetry, especially through such a poet. Watching a nation through the press is like observing a neighbour through his office windows, where he is busy with his daily pursuits. But if you study a nation through its poetry, you as it were watch your neighbour through his oriel window sitting at ease in the midst of culture. Shakespeare is a permanent ambassador of England in Germany; a most excellent ambassador, for he is accredited not only to the court, but to the whole German people; and his language, though always impressive, is never provocative. He stands before our eyes as a friend found and tested in days of need, an unwavering benefactor, and as a moral world power in very deed; therefore his mediation is sure to be of solid and lasting effect.

This unique position which Shakespeare has attained in Ger-



many, and which he promises to hold for a long time to come, is all the more striking as Shakespeare has paid no special attention to our people, seldom thought of them, and has by no means treated them with particular consideration. He makes fun of German clothing—of the broad hose, from the waist downwards all slops; of German customs—fair Portia's ducal suitor from Saxony is described as 'very vilely in the morning, when he is sober, and most vilely in the afternoon, when he is drunk'; of German watches—always being repaired, and never in order; of the German temper, which, of course, is called hasty. Once, indeed, in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, we come upon a friendly assertion: 'Germans are honest men'; but on looking closer one discovers that it is only the landlady of an inn who says so, and then only in order to clear a distinguished German traveller of the suspicion of horse-stealing. He has heard of Wittenberg, and makes Hamlet study there, but for the spiritual achievements of Wittenberg he has never a word. He makes Vienna the scene of *Measure for Measure*, but it is to him a town full of gross looseness and amours. He mentions the Switzers, but only as the mercenary life-guards of Hamlet's miserable uncle. From the national point of view, there is not the slightest reason why a German should feel enthusiastic about Shakespeare. After all, the cosmopolitan vein in the German character has been strong enough to ignore such compliments.

Still, independence and spontaneity of action on the German side has not been altogether wanting. The impression which a poet produces always rests upon two factors: first, the quality of his work, and secondly, the predisposition of the reader. One and the same poem is apprehended differently, let me say, by a scholar who is well read in the classics, and by a countryman who is only versed in popular songs. Shakespeare was regarded differently by his own countrymen in the seventeenth century and in the nineteenth century: at the time of Dryden, boisterous Falstaff was considered his happiest character, Hamlet was represented as a very dignified and courtly person with a majestic periwig, and the weird sisters in *Macbeth*, instead of appearing in supernatural awe, had to perform a burlesque dance. But Charles Lamb and many of his contemporaries worshipped Shakespeare as a mystical philosopher, and, according to their opinion, to represent his plays on the stage amounted almost to profanation. There is no less difference of opinion about Shakespeare at present between his English and his German admirers.

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Strange as it may sound, it is a fact that there exist two Shakespeares, one on this, one on the other side of the North Sea, both fully developed, both felt as strong realities in life, literature, and the theatre.

Allow me, for a moment, to describe the principal qualities of the German Shakespeare.

First of all he is modern, because he is read and acted in translations. The obsolete words and the quaint meanings of words which often puzzle his English reader, and sometimes even demand comment, are replaced by current phrases. His Elizabethan ruggedness is almost too much smoothed over. In our classical translation by Schlegel-Tieck the meaning is put forth so clearly that, when I had to reprint it in a popular edition, there was sometimes not even one passage to be explained in a whole play—so perfectly had the Tudor words been recast in lucid and up-to-date German. In consequence, a German reader and spectator feels himself in a way drawn closer to Shakespeare than a Londoner, who has no other choice than to take him in the original. It is easier in Germany than in his own country to apply his sentences to the programme of a brand-new party of writers or artists; he lends himself with more freedom to questions of the day in Berlin or Munich than in London or Manchester.

Another feature of the German Shakespeare results from the difference in national customs. In Germany reserve is not so strictly demanded as in England; a loud laugh is considered less objectionable, even in cultivated society, and gestures are not so readily called extravagant. Imagine, therefore, how different a Falstaff scene, a meeting between lovers, an agitated discussion, must appear in a German theatre! In this respect the German may even claim to be more faithful to the historical Shakespeare, who makes Romeo and Othello, when in excitement, roll on the floor, and Hamlet leap into Ophelia's grave to wrestle with her brother. German manners have remained a little more old-fashioned. Thus it comes that our Shakespeare, though he sounds more modern in words, looks more like the sixteenth century in manners.

A third peculiarity of the German Shakespeare is one for which our classic writers are answerable, who so vigorously transformed him into new life. Margaret in Goethe's *Faust* has so much in common with the bride of Romeo, that an audience who sees them often finds it difficult to keep them quite separate. Even the actress who impersonates Margaret one evening, will next evening,

while acting the part of Juliet, unconsciously embody essential traits of the modest, patient German citizen girl in her representation of the self-possessed and strong-minded daughter of Lord Capulet. Such blending of Shakespearian characters with those of favourite German plays happened very often in our good old *Hoftheaters*.

In addition, there was the influence of our older critics, with Goethe once more at the head. Hamlet e.g. was described by him as a delicate soul on whose shoulders too heavy a task had been laid; no wonder, then, that German actors often played the part in too sentimental a fashion. At the present, without doubt, a strong reaction has set in; the reformers of our stage, Max Reinhardt and others, have discovered wonderful ways of showing Shakespeare in the broad daylight of realism and of the *Jugendstil*. But still English actors, when touring in Germany, though their performances of Shakespeare are often excellent, find it very difficult to please German spectators; they put forth their London Shakespeare, but the *Berliner* sticks to his beloved German Shakespeare who is endeared to him through Goethe and through the translations of Goethe's clever disciple Schlegel.

In the fourth place we have to consider the general expectations with which a nation will approach literature. If my students are brought into contact with Englishmen of their own age and conditions, they are always astonished at the English students' habit of asking: What benefit shall I derive from this or that new author? Can he inspire me with a brighter outlook on life, or infuse into me greater strength of soul? Is he a noble educator like Wordsworth? Is he a delightful teacher like the ideal poet whom Sir Philip Sidney has painted in his famous *Apology*?

Young Germans look at literature in a more disinterested way. They want to be shown life, as intense life as possible, which will enable them to pass, while reading, through all the experiences of the persons described, as if they were experiences of their own. They want, in following the dreams of the poet, to explore the heights and the depths of human nature—not to alter human nature. To them didactic verse savours neither of poetry, nor wit, nor invention: psychological truth in poetry is their heart's desire. It is natural that Shakespeare will fare very differently at their hands. Englishmen lay more emphasis on his wisdom, Germans on his passion. To the Englishman—with the exception of Mr. Bernard Shaw, of course—Shakespeare is the national hero, with hardly any human weakness; to the German the earlier and

weaker attempts of Shakespeare are not only facts, but most interesting facts, from which to regard the wonderful heights he reached later.

In consequence, English critics, as a rule, discard such rude plays of his juvenile period as *Titus Andronicus* or *Henry VI*, although the strongest external evidence speaks for their genuineness; they would feel ashamed if their Shakespeare had really indulged in the 'Gothic' horrors by which the cannibal revenge of Titus is provoked, and if he had really represented the brave heroine Joan of Arc as a profligate wench. To German students, in spite of their sincere respect for the 'Jungfrau von Orleans', it does not matter if young Shakespeare, during his period of storm and stress, following Holinshed and other chroniclers, should have slightly overstepped the bounds of humanity. If his beginnings were crude, the brilliancy of his later works appears to them all the more striking.

I do not wish to express an opinion concerning these two Shakespeares. To many an Englishman the German Shakespeare is sure to appear nationalized to such an extent as almost to wear the garb of a foreign poet. On the other hand, the German will argue that genius, the rarest gift which nature can bestow on a nation, never belongs to that nation exclusively, but to the whole of mankind; and that there is no divine or human law which forbids foreigners to penetrate into the genius of such a man, to amalgamate themselves with him, until he becomes to them, by their sympathetic work, almost one of their own. But one thing is proved beyond doubt by the existence of these two Shakespeares; that the Shakespearian spirit is alive and active in both countries. Only the most popular writers are objects of strife; as soon as an author is left in peace, it shows that he is dying—historians and philologists may bury him in their libraries. And there is no fear that the two Shakespearian parties will do any harm to each other. Let an opportunity arise for showing gratitude and love to Shakespeare, and both nations, yea, all civilized peoples, will stand up like one man, and hail him with one voice, as the greatest creator in literature.

Such an opportunity will present itself in a short time, when we shall celebrate the 300th anniversary of his death—his first three centuries of immortality. If, on April 23, 1916, the world's homage to the poet of Hamlet and Lear will be rendered, as is hoped, here, in the capital of his country, the scene of his literary activity, it will be an assertion of the harmonizing power of poetry over

distinctions of race, it will demonstrate the empire of Shakespeare of which Carlyle perhaps spoke even in too modest terms, and it will help us to realize that, after all, humanity is larger than nationality.

*Au revoir* till Shakespeare Day, in 1916!

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